

The Call for Hope

A man goes to the doctor and says, “Doctor, I just don’t know what to do. My heart is broken. I have to pull myself together. Please help me. The doctor is unfazed, even delighted. “What great timing,” she says. “I have the perfect fix for you. There’s this clown who is performing this very evening right down the street. They say this clown is so amazing. He juggles fruit and eats it while standing on his head. I heard not a single person leaves his performance without being filled with hope! I’m going for the first time tonight! He’s called the Great Clown, Pagliacci.” To the doctor’s surprise, instead of being relieved, her new patient breaks down crying. He’s now sitting on the floor with his head in his hands. What’s wrong,” the doctor asks? In between sobs, the man replies, “Doctor, I am the Great Clown Pagliacci!”

This strange and sad joke has been around since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.” Whatever it has meant to those who have told it through the years, for me, it says everything about the state we find ourselves in as we enter Rosh Hashanah, filled with many emotions. It’s wonderful, grounding, and satisfying to be together and pray together. But I think many of us feel what author Dahlia Lithwick called broken but blessed – that sense that you can personally be surviving but also that nothing is actually OK.

From the strife of mistrust and division in this country to the alarming reality of a warming planet, and closest to home on a day when millions of Jews gather in synagogues around the world, to the terrible, tragic, and unending war in Israel, we begin the holiday with broken hearts. Like Pagliacci

and his doctor, we are searching for uplift out of the deep brokenness we feel. We are searching for hope.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote, “Judaism is the religion, and [the Jewish people] ... the home, of hope.”<sup>1</sup> But our tradition understands that hope cannot be handed to us. Would that it were that easy. Rather, through our tradition, we are given tools to find it together. One of those tools is the essence of the entire High Holy Days, as symbolized by the blasts of the shofar. We’ve already heard it twice, with two more times ahead this morning. For so many of us, the blowing of the shofar is a highlight. It’s so unique to us and eerily beautiful. We listen with so much anticipation to this once-a-year event that gifts us with a deep message. *Tekiah! Shevarim! Teruah! Tekiah Gedolah!* The *Tekiah*, *Shevarim*, and *Teruah*, three distinct blasts, each with its own meaning. And, put together, they provide us a pathway to searching for hope as a community during difficult times. ***Tekiah!*** The *Tekiah* **symbolizes** hope. It was used in Temple times to gather the people for celebrations. As we began the Days of Awe last night, we used this single blast as an initial call of attention, a welcoming, optimistic wake-up call, and a hint at the faith that we will be written in the Book of Life for a good year. The *Tekiah* is a paradigm for us, a reminder of what hope is. On Rosh Hashanah morning, it again leads off the shofar service and then is interspersed, almost sprinkled amongst the other blasts several times throughout. In our lives, the *Tekiah* can represent the small things that bring us meaning and sweetness, showing us that even when we are facing a difficult time, we have to look for those opportunities to grasp onto hints of blessing, of gratitude, laughter, joy. Our families. A softball game. A phone

call from a friend. The *Tekiah* surprises us, like when your favorite song comes on the radio, or an uninvited guest shows up right at the time when you need them most. The *Tekiah* is what keeps us going. It's the whisper that we anticipate will stretch into a louder noise; we need it to get to the great *Tekiah Gedolah* at the end, to which the smaller one is constantly inviting us. This is the long blast with the face turning red and the unknown of how and when it will end. The one that takes a lot of breath and energy, and one person is doing the blowing, but everyone is with them.

This one finishes the shofar service and also provides the closing moment at sunset on Yom Kippur. The *Tekiah Gedolah* is our combined hope gathered together, the grand transformation that we are all working towards.

**Shevarim!** The word *shevarim* means broken. This blast of the shofar cries out with three echoes of wailing and weeping. We cry out to each other in recognition of the shatteredness of where we are, the brokenness of our hearts. I recently encountered an interesting Yiddish word, *tzebrokhenkayt*. *Tzebrohnikayt* literally means, simply, brokenheartedness, but what I have learned is that in Yiddish, it has a special connotation. It is the *type* of brokenheartedness that has within it the roots of healing. This is the broken heart that cries out in the *Shevarim*.

Rabbi Alan Lew told a story of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chasidic Judaism, who held a competition to see who would blow the shofar for him on Rosh Hashanah. Now, if you wanted to blow the shofar for the Baal Shem Tov, not only did you have to be a virtuoso, but you also had to learn an elaborate system of *kavanot* – secret prayers that were said just before you

blew the shofar to direct the blasts properly into the supernal realms. All the prospective shofar blowers practiced these *kavanot* for months.

And there was one student who wanted this role in the service so badly that he had been practicing for years. When his time came to audition, he realized that nothing he had done prepared him for the experience of standing before this great and holy man. He choked. His mind froze completely. He couldn't remember even one of his *kavanot*. He didn't blow the shofar. He just stood there in total silence. When he realized how utterly he had failed this great test, his heart just broke in two, and he began to weep, his shoulders heaving, his whole body wracking as he wept. All right, you're hired, the Baal Shem said. But I don't understand, the man said, I failed the test completely. So the Baal Shem explained with a parable: In the palace of the king there are many secret chambers. And there are secret keys for each chamber. But one key unlocks them all, and that key is the axe. The ax is the broken heart.<sup>ii</sup>

The reality of life is that there are deep moments of brokenness, loss, and despair. And yet, this teaching challenges us to see our brokenness as a necessary part of reaching a new place; the potential for a beginning, like soil, must break for a new seed to grow. The Baal Shem Tov knows the power of a person who has seen his hopes dashed and his plans upended, who can bring a prayer out of his moment of crisis. He understands that for a community to begin to move towards hope, it must be able to confront the place where it is shattered. To face its brokenheartedness together.

***Teruah!*** *Teruah* is the call to move forward. It is the journey from the broken place of *shevarim* to the hopeful redemption of the *Tekiah Gedolah*. But what is the path? The greatest obstacle to an honest journey of *Teruah* is

the pretense that it is easier than it is. The most iconic story of redemption in Torah is the parting of the Red Sea. The Israelites are trapped, the Egyptian soldiers are about to capture them, and WOOSH! God parts the waters. The people sing *Mi chamocha ba'eilim Adonai. Mi kamocha nedar bakodesh*. I love the *Mi Chamocha* prayer. It's the high point of the service. But if we are looking for hope in a genuinely difficult time, I find the Red Sea narrative sort of MEH. We don't believe in a God who rescues us from our troubles, so the story feels fake. It doesn't give me hope. I believe we need a different vision of what happened at the Red Sea. Even the beautiful midrash about the leader Nachshon, who led the people in taking the first steps into the water till they were neck deep, and then, again, the waters suddenly parted, and they burst into freedom! Even this slightly more real story is not enough. It's not just a first step we need, but readiness for a long, hard journey.

The Torah doesn't tell us that the waters parted quickly. It says a wind blew all night long. The people's redemption was slow and unsure, a shared and courageous journey to freedom, little step by little step. It was trudging through muddy water in the dark, arms outstretched to steady each other and pull one another along.

There is something mechanically different about the *Teruah* from the *Tekiah* and the *Shevarim*. It's not a sustained blast suggesting a quick or dramatic journey. The *Teruah* is a call made of nine short, staccato sounds. While it does come from one breath, the exhalation is interrupted by using the tongue to break the flow of air again and again. We don't get there all at once. We may not always feel like we are moving. Nine bursts, gently pulling us

forward into the many tiny steps that take us from where we are to where we hope to go.

While the shofar blasts always speak to our lives in some way, while they always capture some part of our personal realities, this year, they seem to be a keen reflection of where many of us are as individuals and as a community. They might help us even more this year to look for hope in a moment of despair for the Jewish people, the State of Israel, and everyone suffering from this war. The blasts taken together help us zoom into where we are, and also zoom out and see the wider view.

When we step back in this way and think of Israel, we see that the *Tekiah* is there. There are so many little things that give us hope every day: the banana trees in Galilee and date trees in the desert; the people playing paddle ball and volleyball on the Tel Aviv beach; the folk dancing outside on Saturday night; the Hebrew you can hear everywhere you go and the people who will teach it to you whether you want it or not; the art overflowing in the streets in the Old City of Jaffa; eating fresh vegetables for breakfast and fresh mint everywhere. There are the bigger *Tekiahs*, the heroic and hopeful stories of providing a refuge for Jews from Europe, and then Ethiopia, and then Russia. And the hopeful connections we at TRS have with Israel, from traveling there in groups to seeing some of our teens spend semesters of high school there to our ties with our sister congregation in Ra'anana.

Then there is the brokenness, *Shevarim*: the persistent challenge of facing dangerous and deadly threats. Watching Israel struggle to maintain its values of democracy and equality, especially in relationship with the Palestinian people. The destructive chaos of Israeli politics.

And now, the terrible, unimaginable brokenness that began on Oct 7, including the fear we are feeling right now with the volatile situation with Iran and with Hezbollah in Lebanon.

*Teruah* feels really hard for us right now. But I believe there are small steps that are underway. We should be immensely grateful for the support of the United States and what it has done to defend Israel and try to help safely and securely end the conflict. We see heroic acts by individuals, hostages, and their families, the Reform Movement in Israel, and many other groups doing their part to sustain all of Israel's communities. Some of us have felt moved to travel there during this time, to offer support, to bear witness, to help Israelis, including Jewish and Palestinian Israelis, heal and begin to rebuild. And even though it is a time of war with all the justifiable reasons to cleave to one side, we see incredible examples of groups of Jews and Arabs,

both here and there, with the courage to stand together for shared values of coexistence, like the Jerusalem Youth Chorus, which has continued performing, and New Story Leadership, a group of young people from Israel and from the territories studying and dialoguing together in Washington, DC, who have been working on their own ideas for a plan to move forward after the war is over.

People who are taking steps – even if they can only be tiny ones – that keep our in minds, the *Tekiah Gedolah*, the vision and hope of a better future. We know it is slow and aspirational. But this is why we have the *Tekiah Gedolah*. It assures us that there is something greater there towards which we can direct our steps. So that, no matter how far away it is, it can never be lost. This year, the Tekiah Gedolah calls out for the goal that these two peoples will

be able to live in mutual safety and recognition, the goal of self-determination for both nations, with ***neither side's*** right to that self-determination being denied. The goal of living with each other without fear. The hope for peace.

Rabbi Chaim of Sans tells a story of a man who has been lost in a forest for days. He's so deep in the trees he doesn't know whether he is coming or going. Finally, he is overjoyed to see another man walking towards him. Hello, he says, please show me the path! I am lost. And the man says, Brother, I cannot show you, for I too am lost. But take my hand, and we will search for the way together.

Sometimes, the steps toward hope are wandering steps. There are moments when we have to turn, look around, and search for the right path. But even when we feel lost, we keep moving together.

On Rosh Hashanah, as we join each other in our important individual and collective journeys, whether we are contemplating the tragic events in Israel or the many other struggles, challenges, and, also, joys we have experienced this year, may we approach our reflections with honesty and humility, may we be lifted by the tekiah moments when we felt success and happiness, and may we emerge from shevarim, the experiences of brokenness we have had, with a new sense of hope for the year ahead: hope for ourselves, our families, our community; hope for our people, and, tekiah gedolah, hope for our world. I'd like to share with you these words of hope from Alden Solovy:



## **Let Your Heart Stir**

Breathe in the sound of the shofar.

Let the trumpet of our people

Be the voice of your heart.

For your soul knows the call.

Let your heart stir

And your eyes open, anew.

Taste the sweetness of the new year.

The delight of healing,

The joy of possibilities,

The pleasure of being.

Let your heart stir

And your eyes open anew.

Exalt in the triumph of forgiveness.

Let the glory of repentance

Be the light of your days,

For your spirit knows the way home.

Let your heart stir

And your eyes open anew.<sup>iii</sup>

---

<sup>i</sup> Jonathan Sacks, "Future Tense," The Jewish Chronicle, Apr 1, 2008

<sup>ii</sup> Adapted from Alan Lew, *This is Real, and You are Completely Unprepared*, p. 98

<sup>iii</sup> Alden Solovy <https://tobendlight.com/2013/08/let-your-heart-stir/>